

## **Autonomy across the English Curriculum through Extensive Reading**

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### **Abstract**

This paper will report on a successful extensive reading programme at Tokai University in Japan, which uses a delivery system library of graded readers to foster individualisation and learner autonomy across the English curriculum. The first section will look at the key terms of autonomy, extensive reading and graded readers and consider the relationship between them. The second part of the paper will explain how the delivery system graded reader library at Tokai University attempts to foster learner autonomy, and to what extent this has been successful.

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### **Introduction**

Introducing student choice and learner autonomy to an English curriculum can be a troublesome process at the best of times. The Foreign Language Center (FLC) at Tokai University in Japan faces many of the problems that challenge EFL departments around the world. First, most of the students it teaches are non-English majors (98% in the case of Tokai University) and so English proficiency amongst the students varies enormously. Second, most class work is textbook based and the university has no supporting facilities such as a self-access centre. Finally, in practical terms, most teachers have to deal with the kind of student who comes to class, waits to be told what to do, and who stops thinking about English the moment they leave the classroom.

Yet, several teachers at Tokai University have made an effort to overcome these obstacles to learner autonomy and student choice, by introducing extensive reading with graded readers across the English curriculum. Graded readers, of course, are commonplace in many university libraries or self-access centres but books in these locations are often underused, or in many cases, simply unread. The solution devised at Tokai University was to take the books directly into the classroom and train the students there, using a delivery system library of graded readers.

In the delivery system library, the graded readers are not in a library or self-access centre but are kept in shopping carts, which are taken directly into the classroom by the teacher. Importantly, neither the library nor associated reading of books is part of the mainstream reading curriculum at the university. Rather it is an independent project aimed at fostering extensive reading and learner autonomy across the entire English curriculum. Indeed, use of the library is not restricted to reading classes but is widely used in English speaking, writing and listening classes. Since 2003, when the library was created, the delivery system has brought tens of thousands of books into the classroom of over six thousand students, facilitating independent reading and a measure of student autonomy.

This paper will explain how extensive reading with a library of graded readers can empower students by setting them on the path to some degree of learner autonomy. The first section will look at the key terms of autonomy, extensive reading and graded readers and consider the relationship between them. The second part of the paper will explain how the delivery system graded reader library at Tokai University attempts to foster learner autonomy, and to what extent this has been successful.

## Key terms

Before looking at the delivery system library at Tokai University, it is necessary to examine the meaning of, and relationship between, autonomy, extensive reading and graded readers.

### *Autonomy and Individualisation*

While the term autonomy is often used interchangeably with individualisation there are important differences. Holec (1981) defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning' (p. 3), while Benson (2001) describes individualisation as 'a mode of instruction in which learners [are] expected to work their way, at their own pace, through materials prepared by the teachers' (p. 11). In the United Kingdom, the term independence is often preferred to autonomy but is essentially the same concept.

### *Graded Readers*

According to Waring & Takahashi (2000), graded readers are 'books written specifically for language learners to develop their reading ability. They are made easy to read by simplifying the vocabulary and grammar so the learner can easily understand the story' (p. 8). As such, they provide interesting, level-appropriate materials that allow learners to recycle vocabulary and practice fluent reading in English. Graded readers are suited to individualising the curriculum because they are published in different levels of difficulty providing reading material to match the reading abilities of most students. For example, Level 1 graded readers in the Oxford University Press Bookworm Series are written from a corpus of 400 common headwords, while a Level 6 book is created from a corpus of 2500 headwords. This allows a reader to select a book that is appropriate to their reading level. Moreover, the wide range of titles allows students to exercise choice in selecting books they would like to read.

### *Extensive Reading*

Bamford & Day (1997) define extensive reading as 'generally associated with reading large amounts with the aim of getting an overall understanding of the material. Readers are more concerned with the meaning of the text than the meaning of individual words or sentences' (para. 1). As an approach to reading, it has gained a high profile in the past twenty years, largely due to the influence of Krashen's theories of 'comprehensible input' and what he terms 'free voluntary reading' (1993, p. 23). While English proficiency gains through extensive reading are well documented, (see Nation, 1997, and Day & Bamford, 1998), this paper is concerned with the benefits of extensive reading with regard to facilitating autonomy. Perhaps the most obvious characteristic of extensive reading is that it is usually done out of the classroom. This has clear pedagogical advantages. University students in Japan usually only have a few hours of English a week at most, so reading outside class is an important addition. Davis writes:

...extensive reading is a crucial adjunct to classroom teaching, in helping to expose pupils to far more 'good' English than, unassisted, the English teacher could ever hope to do – and that it can do this more enjoyably than most English lessons (1995, p. 329).

By selecting their own books and taking them out of the classroom to read, students are exercising choice and taking responsibility for their own learning. As Nation argues:

The idea that learners can develop their language knowledge through extensive reading is attractive for several reasons. First, reading is essentially an individual activity and therefore learners of different proficiency levels could be learning at their own level without being locked into an inflexible class

programme. Second, it allows learners to follow their interests in choosing what to read and thus increase their motivation for learning. Third, it provides the opportunity for learning to occur outside the classroom. (1997, p. 1)

To sum up, a student who practices extensive reading through access to a library of graded readers is able to be an independent learner because: they can select what they want to read, at a level that suits their proficiency, out of the classroom at a time and place of their choosing. In addition, they can progress through a library of books at their own rate, without being locked into an inflexible class programme, and they can assume some measure of responsibility for their own learning.

### **The Graded Reader Library at Tokai University**

The graded reader library at Tokai University began in 2003 with a little more than 1,000 graded reader books and twelve participating teachers. Today, it has increased to over 10,000 books, organised into 10 levels of difficulty, and is regularly used by almost 40 teachers a semester. The library is a stand-alone reading programme, open to any English teacher, student or class, making the books accessible across campus. The library has two main goals. The first goal is to bring about a positive attitude towards reading across the entire English curriculum. The second goal, and the concern of this paper, is to facilitate learner autonomy, by giving students the opportunity to exercise choice and by helping them to take on more responsibility for their own learning.

#### *The Delivery System*

The Tokai University graded reader library works as a delivery system. Books are not accessed through a library or resource centre but are brought to the classroom by the teacher in a 'shopping' cart. English classes are usually scheduled twice a week, so students borrow books on a weekly or bi-weekly basis over a 13-week semester. Once in the classroom, the books are laid neatly on tables according to level and the students select two or three books to take home. Each graded reader has a unique number and card at the back of the book. The students write their name on the card and hand it to the teacher. This way, the teacher has a record of books borrowed. Books are taken out of the classroom to read, so the process does not impinge upon precious class time other than overseeing the borrowing or returning of books. While some teachers require their students to read a minimum number of books per semester and award credit accordingly, most teachers encourage reading on a voluntary basis. The only consistent requirement that teachers make on students is that they keep a record of books read. This is important because it gives the students a sense of accomplishment and it helps the teacher to monitor progress. The forty or so teachers who use the books are put into relay teams of three to four teachers. Each relay team shares a collection of several hundred graded readers in one 'shopping' cart, which is passed from teacher to teacher within the team throughout the week in a rotation system. Put simply, the teacher and the 'shopping' cart is a vehicle for getting the graded readers to the students, who will hopefully engage in reading for pleasure, without any pressure, out of the classroom.

The delivery system has several advantages over regular libraries or self-access centres. First, the graded reader library is completely portable. Books and 'shopping' carts are located in several building across the campus providing access to the library for all classes. Secondly, by not restricting the books to reading classes, the books can be used in any English class. In fact, the majority of teachers who use the books do *not* teach reading. Thirdly, the delivery system bridges the gap between a university learning resource and students who might be hesitant about accessing university facilities. Finally, taking the books into the classroom brings the three key

elements – students, books and a teacher – together in one place at the same time. This facilitates student training and education, and is explained in the next section.

### *The Importance of Training*

For students to become independent learners it is not enough to point them in the direction of the nearest library. For students, whose previous experience of autonomy is likely to be limited, they first need to be trained. More specifically, students need to learn about extensive reading and graded readers, how to select appropriate reading material, how to make choices, and how to develop a good reading habit that will continue over the long term. Benson (2001) writes: ‘...fostering autonomy does not imply that we simply leave learners to their own devices, but that we actively encourage and assist them to take control of their learning’ (p. 75). The delivery system aims to do this by bringing the books and the students together under the supervision and guidance of a trained teacher. This way, the teacher can train students in the classroom how to select books of an appropriate level of difficulty. In addition, as students exercise choice by selecting books to read at home, teachers can monitor their progress as they take on more responsibility for their own learning.

However, before the student can learn these things, the teacher must first be taught them. Consequently, before any teacher takes graded readers into the classroom, he or she undergoes a training session with one of the coordinators of the graded reader library. In the training session, teachers are taught about reading methodology and the nuts and bolts of the delivery system. Particular attention is drawn to the importance of helping students select books at an appropriate level and how to prepare for reading beyond the semester. As Hill writes: ‘The success of the [reading] programme depends more on teachers than on any other single factor... Training is essential’ (1992, p. 54).

### *Learner Autonomy: A Two Stage Process*

At the beginning of 2006, the main library on campus acquired its own collection of between one and two thousand graded readers, making a second library of books completely separate to those in the delivery system library. This was in many ways the final piece of the jigsaw in using graded readers to facilitate independent reading across the university. The main library graded readers allowed extensive reading on campus to develop into a two-stage process.

Stage one is the teacher using the delivery system library during a semester, talking about extensive reading, training the students how to select appropriate books, encouraging them to read regularly, helping them to make choices and generally monitoring them as they gain confidence in using graded readers. In short, getting students hooked on reading so that they will continue to read extensively as independent learners. Stage two is at the end of the semester when the students leave the teacher’s class. The aim is that learners will continue to read extensively via the main library books and become truly independent readers. This will only happen, of course, if learners have discovered the pleasure of reading in English during the semester. This two-step approach is key because, for learners to truly benefit from extensive reading, they need to regularly read large amounts of English. The delivery system can only provide the books for a semester; for the remaining time at university and beyond, it is up to the individual student to seek out the books they need.

## **Results**

Student pleasure in the delivery system library came fairly rapidly. According to Professor Ferrato:

A community of readers was formed. Students quickly became hooked on books. It worked like magic. Some students were so eager for their next book

that they sometimes couldn't wait until the next class period and instead came to the teacher's office to borrow another book. And their excitement was contagious. Once a few students became hooked, others were quick to join in the fun, adventure, and sense of accomplishment (2004, p. 93).

The number of students reading books began modestly in the spring semester of 2003, with 285 students reading 1275 books. However, the scale of reading on campus increased rapidly so that by the 2007-2008 autumn semester 1470 students read 11230 books (see Table 1). Moreover, the students were accessing books in classes across the English curriculum. The different English classes using the library included: English oral communication, TOEFL, discussion and presentation, listening, and English seminar classes. Also, the library was used by all students from freshman to graduate students, and by all English teachers, from native-speaking teachers of English to Japanese teachers of English, and from full-time staff to part-time members of faculty.

The figures below are for the 2007-2008 autumn semester and illustrate the breadth and depth of extensive reading at the university. Each book read is evidence of a student making decisions for himself or herself and assuming some degree of responsibility for their own learning.

**Table 1: Delivery System Library in the 2007-2008 Autumn Semester**

	<b>Total</b>
Number of graded readers in the delivery system library:	11,230 (2003: 1,275)
Number of different titles of graded readers:	914
Number of teachers who participated: * Several teachers used the books in more than one class	38 (2003: 12)
Number of classes who used the books: * Only 10 classes were reading classes	49
Number of participating students:	1470 (2003: 285)
Number of number of books read:	11230

The above data is evidence of wide scale extensive reading but proof that the extensive reading programme was really changing students' study and reading habits came from the main library on campus. The hypothesis when the main library purchased its own collection of books was that once students had become hooked on reading books through the delivery system, they would have both the thirst to continue reading in English and the knowledge of how to do it independently. This hypothesis was proved at the end of the 2006-2007 autumn semester. The main library found that twenty-two of the top twenty-seven most checked out books in the 2006-2007

academic year were English graded readers. On a university campus with 98% non-English major students, this was a great success and vindication of the delivery system.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has suggested that extensive reading with graded readers is an effective way of facilitating individualisation across the English curriculum and of fostering a degree of learner autonomy. In fact, with graded readers, teachers have ready-made learning material that is suitable for a range of levels. In addition, this paper has illustrated how the delivery system graded reader library at Tokai University has done this very successfully despite a large body of non-English major students and the lack of a self-access centre. Indeed, it could be argued that it is the delivery system itself that is the key to success at Tokai University. Such a system not only means that the graded readers are physically accessible across campus but that the training, education and support of students is effective through having the teacher, students and books together in the classroom. In short, the delivery system graded reader library at Tokai University stands as an alternative to self-access facilities as a means of introducing learner autonomy and individualisation across the English curriculum.

### **The Author**

Andrew Imrie received his MSc in Information Processing from York University and his MA in TESOL from the University of London. His research interests include extensive reading, autonomy and content-based instruction. He is currently a Lecturer at Tokai University in Japan.

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